

# Equatorial Guinea

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## Freedom of the Press

The regime of longtime President Teodoro Obiang Nguema Mbasogo continued to maintain a tight grip on the press in 2013, including employing censorship of online media just prior to national elections in May.

Freedoms of expression and the press are legally guaranteed and assured in public declarations by Obiang, but these rights are ignored in practice. As in past years, the government relied on its extensive powers under the 1992 Law on the Press, Publishing, and Audiovisual Media, including the right to official prepublication censorship, to severely restrict journalistic activity. Libel and defamation are criminal acts, and journalists can go to prison if convicted. As a result, self-censorship in both the print and audiovisual media is rife.

There are no laws guaranteeing freedom of information. In practice, access to information is restricted to members of the state-owned media, who are civil servants and subject to dismissal if their reporting runs afoul of state censors.

Local journalists and private publications are required to register with the government through a prohibitively complex and bureaucratic process. While two associations for journalists—the Press Association of Equatorial Guinea and the Association of Professional Journalists—are registered in the country, they are of little use and are governed by members of the ruling party.

Almost all local coverage is orchestrated or tightly controlled by the government, and state-controlled media do not cover international news unless the president or another senior official travels abroad. Opposition parties are generally denied access to the state media. In the past few years, journalists have been allowed to voice mild or vague criticisms of government institutions, but there is no tolerance for any criticism of the president, his family or other high-ranking officials or the security forces. For example, the media are unable to report on the multiple international criminal investigations into alleged money laundering by the president's son. Coverage of the Arab Spring, the unrest in Mali, and the ongoing conflict in Syria has also been prohibited. According to the U.S. State Department, the internet has replaced broadcast media as the primary medium for opposition views. Consequently, in the lead-up to national parliamentary and municipal elections in late May 2013, Facebook and the website of the main opposition party were blocked on orders from the president's office, while the website of the ruling Democratic Party of Equatorial Guinea remained fully accessible.

Journalists who cross the line into impermissible reporting typically suffer reprisals, including being blacklisted, losing their job, or having their programs cancelled; a number of such cases have been reported in recent years. These reprisals also extended beyond Equatorial Guinea's borders; Obiang filed a libel case against the France-based nongovernmental organization Catholic Committee against Hunger, which published a report alleging that he had plundered national oil profits for extensive personal gain. In April 2013, a French lower court ruled against Obiang, a decision that was upheld upon appeal. In addition, journalists who tried to cover the May 2013 elections faced physical harassment and occasionally had their equipment confiscated by police or election officials.

Few international journalists are granted access to the country. Those who are allowed in require special press accreditation that is approved on a case-by-case basis; inside the country, their movements are monitored and they face routine censorship, particularly on coverage of poverty and the oil sector.

Radio is the most influential medium in the country, and all domestic radio and television stations are operated by the government or members of the president's family. The state broadcaster, Radio-Television Equatorial Guinea (RTVGE), operates directly under the Ministry of Information, Press and Radio. The top two radio stations are the state-run Radio Nacional de Guinea Ecuatorial and the private Radio Asonga, owned by the president's son. Applications to open private radio stations have been pending for several years but remain unapproved. Uncensored satellite television broadcasts are increasingly available to the small number of those who can afford the service. International radio stations—including Radio France and British Broadcasting Corp. (BBC) Africa—are not censored and also can be picked up in Malabo, but do not reach far beyond the capital. The government operates at least two newspapers, while a handful are published irregularly by nominally independent figures or members of the small political opposition. *El Lector*, which claims to be an independent newspaper, was launched at the National University of Equatorial Guinea in 2012. However, the paper's articles tend to praise the Obiang government. An estimated 16.4 percent of the population accessed the internet in 2013.

The country has little of the infrastructure necessary for independent print media to operate and be disseminated widely, such as printing presses and newspaper retailers. The only publishing facility for print media is located at the Ministry of Information, which facilitates the government's prepublication censorship. Newspapers are generally unavailable in rural areas. In addition, the lack of a well-developed local private sector hinders the ability of media outlets to raise revenues through advertisements.

## **2014 Scores**

### **Press Status**

Not Free

### **Press Freedom Score**

**(0 = best, 100 = worst)**

90

### **Legal Environment**

**(0 = best, 30 = worst)**

27

### **Political Environment**

**(0 = best, 40 = worst)**

36

### **Economic Environment**

**(0 = best, 30 = worst)**

27

